Meet Your Campus Troubleshooter

By Audrey Williams

When several tenure-track faculty members at Furman University had some workplace concerns that they didn’t know how to sort out, they turned to Victoria Turgeon for help.

Turgeon, a professor of biology at the institution, was widely known by her faculty colleagues as someone who they could trust; she’d held leadership positions in Furman’s chapter of the American Association of University Professors. Usually, she’d talk her fellow professors through their workplace issues with ease, but this time around, Turgeon wasn’t sure how to guide them.

So she set up a meeting with Furman’s president, Elizabeth Davis, to, while still keeping her colleagues’ concerns in confidence, relay what she’d heard. But Turgeon was surprised when Davis asked her not just about the problem that had brought her there, nearly four years ago now, but also about a job Turgeon wasn’t very familiar with: ombudsman.

The job, which has been on college campuses for more than 50 years, involves being a sounding board and conflict resolver for the faculty, and all-purpose troubleshooter. Baylor University, where Davis had been provost, had a faculty ombudsman, and Davis wanted to know “if I would consider doing something like that,” Turgeon said.

Because of Turgeon’s distinctive relationship with her peers, she had already taken on an ombudsman’s role in an unofficial capacity. She accepted the position.

A male colleague has since joined her. "When we first became ombudspersons, we had so many people who wanted to talk to us," said Turgeon, who has been at Furman for almost 20 years. "People had no other outlet."

Colleges are complicated environments that attract people from varied backgrounds who have different needs and concerns. In short, campuses are often breeding grounds for misunderstandings and conflict, whether among faculty members, staff, or students. Some of the trouble stems from the bureaucracy that is a hallmark of higher-education institutions. Colleges have lots of policies and processes, and what they are and when they should be applied isn’t always clear. Ombudsmen work to sort out real and perceived problems between people — the kind that can make someone’s work life less than ideal.

But the job carries its own set of tensions. The position is independent of the administration but is not always seen that way. After all, one of the functions of an ombuds — the non-gendered term that some members of the field prefer — is to act as an early-warning system for institutions that ultimately would like the number of formal complaints and lawsuits filed against them to drop.

Ombuds have to tread carefully to avoid taking sides — even if one of the parties involved is a friend. And they have to manage the mistrust of potential "visitors" (that’s what they call...
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the people they assist) who are skeptical that their concerns will be kept confidential.

An ombuds is expected to remain neutral, lay out options for resolving disputes, suggest effective ways to communicate, or help people understand policies. But they aren’t supposed to serve as an advocate, file formal complaints or investigate concerns, or give legal advice.

The ranks of ombudsmen in higher education continue to grow, with institutions like Meharry Medical College and Virginia Tech University among those hiring ombuds for the first time in the last 12 months. The International Ombudsman Association reports that it has roughly 660 members from colleges and universities in the U.S.

"My sense is that it’s a growing field," said Roy Baroff, the faculty and staff ombuds at North Carolina State University. "It’s an exciting time to be an ombudsman."

Varied Backgrounds

The ombudsman’s role, as it’s known today, dates back to 1713 when King Charles XII of Sweden — who was living in exile in Turkey — appointed an ombudsman to act as his representative back home (the term has Norse origins, and it means agent or representative). About 100 years later, Sweden appointed an ombudsman to look into complaints from citizens, and the position’s popularity spread throughout Europe. In the late 1960s the position surfaced in the United States, including at colleges.

The first ombuds office on campus was established in 1967 by Michigan State University, to give students a way to air their concerns. That office, like many across the country, has a broader mandate now, which includes faculty, staff, alumni, and even parents.

"That’s the predominant model, that the ombuds office would serve everybody at the institution," said Tom A. Kosakowski, ombuds for the University of Southern California’s Health Science Campus and the creator of The Ombuds Blog, a resource for the profession.

The job appeals to people from various backgrounds. Some are lawyers and certified mediators like Baroff, at North Carolina State, or Kosakowski, who made the transition nine years ago from practicing law and is now in his third ombuds position. Faculty ombuds, however, typically come from the faculty ranks.

Often they’re longtime professors, like Turgeon, who have informally been doing the work of an ombuds already. Or they’re like Nancy E. Day, who came to the University of Missouri at Kansas City in 1991 and "was ready to do something different" in 2010, when she started the newly created job of faculty ombuds. A professor of human resources and organizational behavior, Day once worked in human resources, and has had to adjust her way of thinking as ombuds.

"Sometimes, I think about what Ms. Nancy Day the HR person thinks they should be doing, but I don’t act on that," said Day, who also has a master’s degree in counseling psychology. Being an ombuds is "a different way of interacting with people."

Faculty ombuds might also come to the job after retirement, like Jean Civikly-Powell did at the University of New Mexico. After spending 27 years as a professor in the department of communication, Civikly-Powell became the university’s faculty ombudsperson. She saw that faculty members at her institution didn’t have a place to turn when they had trouble getting along with each other. In 2000, she proposed to the provost’s office that the university offer ombuds and dispute resolution services to fill the gap. With a background in conflict resolution and interpersonal skills, Civikly-Powell developed the model used by the ombuds office, which she has directed since the beginning.

"Faculty have very strong viewpoints on how to do things and sometimes that can cause some issues," Civikly-Powell said. "People tolerate a lot, but at some point
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People tolerate a lot, but at some point they say, 'I need help. I want to get some guidance on this.'"

She has noticed that established systems in many universities — like the Office of Equal Opportunity, a faculty-led committee on academic freedom and tenure, or the Office of University Counsel — aren’t always effective vehicles for faculty members who are having trouble working with each other. They might differ over how to approach research, mentoring or advising, and internal backbiting can spill over into reputational damage for the institution if the dispute isn’t handled well.

"I’m kind of blatantly subversive in that what I’m trying to do is move the campus to a culture of resolving difficulties at the least adversarial level in a constructive way," said Civikly-Powell, a professor emerita. "I’ve been a faculty member, so I have strong credibility. They know I’ve lived their experience."

For some ombuds, experience from the administrative side of the table is seen as a bonus. John Barker, the new faculty ombuds for the School of Arts and Sciences at the University of Rochester, came to the institution after serving as a dean at Tufts University.

As a longtime administrator, Barker said he has a clear understanding of the resources that the faculty who come to see him need to be connected with. Faculty members can be so focused on their research and their students that they neglect to prioritize navigating sticky workplace situations or confusing on-the-job policies — until they become a problem.

"When you look up, you see a complex organization," Barker said. "How do you navigate a complex system without some insight?"

A Place to Vent

Ombuds deal with a variety of issues, but some come up more than others: conflicts with colleagues or supervisors, departmental dysfunction, misunderstanding policies and procedures, questions about the tenure process, and the aftermath of tenure denial.

Poor communication skills can be at the root of much workplace friction. "I don’t know if it’s being in the South, where people are very polite," said Turgeon, of Furman, "but instead of saying, ‘The way you handled that conflict with a student wasn’t appropriate,’ we’ll just ignore it — and then it will blow up later."

Those blowups are what often test ombuds’ listening skills.

"A big part of my job is just listening — which I’m happy to do," Civikly-Powell said. "Chairs and deans don’t have 45 minutes to an hour to listen to somebody venting."

An ombuds has time to listen, but no authority to intervene. They can only make suggestions on how their visitors might proceed. Typically, at the University of New Mexico, that process unfolds like this: Civikly-Powell starts by giving visitors a folder with information on what her office does, making sure that they understand that "we’re not in the advocate role; we’re here to be able to listen," she said.

After people share their concerns, she talks through their options. Sometimes people want to talk with the person at the core of their dispute. That’s where mediation comes in — if the visitor wants to do that. Civikly-Powell usually makes the ask.

After making sure both parties understand the process, Civikly-Powell sets up a two-hour
meeting where she’ll be joined by two faculty members trained as mediators. Neither mediator will know the parties involved, so “there’s no perceived favoritism.” Civikly-Powell said. When the two people “decide how they want to handle the issue” they can write up an agreement if they choose to. Civikly-Powell, if asked, will keep a copy of it in a locked file.

“I tell people at the beginning, It’s really important to say what matters most to you, what’s on your mind, what were your intentions,” she said. “All of these things don’t happen in normal conversations.”

And sometimes, after a long process of venting, a faculty member will simply opt to do nothing.

“Sometimes problems are really intractable, or resolving them means getting another job or getting a different supervisor,” Day said. “Those things are usually possible, but the cost might be prohibitive.”

She’s seen people realize that it makes sense to learn to live with an issue.

“One person decided that they would start meditating,” Day said. “Other people just decided that they’d spend less time at the office and work from home.”

Of all the skills it takes for ombuds to serve as guides to their college community, perhaps the most important is being able to keep quiet about what they hear. Confidentiality matters, especially to early-career academics or to staff members who don’t want to damage relationships with colleagues they barely know — or whom they depend on for career advancement.

“At some level, it does require people to have trust in the system,” Day said. “The ombudsman needs to be beyond reproach in terms of confidentiality. I’m very, very careful of that.”

**Elusive Impact**

Although ombuds offices have been on college campuses for roughly 50 years, the job remains not widely known, and its effect difficult to measure.

“We have to constantly do outreach and reiterate in so many ways that we’re neutral and informal,” said Kosakowski, a past president of the International Ombudsman Association. Day and Baroff, for instance, both blog about topics related to their work. But in-person visits happen too. Baroff has done presentations about his office before nearly all of North Carolina State’s 60 faculty departments, and in May he took his office’s PR campaign off campus for the first of three “Summer Coffee Hour With the Ombuds” events.

“I think it’s important for people to meet their ombudsman,” Baroff said. “I’m here to help.”

When people do reach out, it could be any time of day or night — which means it’s easy for an ombuds to feel as if they’re always on call. Meetings with visitors can happen outside of regular business hours and even off campus to avoid suspicion from a nosy peer. “If someone emails me, I immediately get back to them,” Turgeon said. “You just have to be flexible and know that the work in this position can’t always happen in that 9-to-5 block.”

Turgeon’s way of managing her workload, in addition to sharing the job with a colleague, was to negotiate from the outset that ombuds’ work would be in lieu of serving on university committees. “That’s what makes it doable,” she said.

Although ombudsmen are known for solving individual problems, institutions rely on them to spot patterns. When ombuds have repeated conversations about particular issues, they can then let administrators know.

“I’m looking for systemic trends that might point to a problem on a larger scale,” Barker said. “I’m asking, ‘Is anyone paying attention to this?’”
When, for example, Day noticed that many conflicts stemmed from communication problems — because faculty supervisors' expectations were often unclear and their actions seemed, to visitors, manipulative — she recommended to administrators that department chairs and deans get training.

It's one thing for an ombuds to diagnose what isn't working and to propose solutions. But it can be much trickier for them to prove that their tactics are effective because so much of what they do is preventative, confidential, or unknowable. The conversations that thwarted workplace blowups, calmed the fears of an anxious tenure-track faculty member, or kept a student from dropping out are all shrouded in secrecy — and the outcome for each visitor once they leave the ombudsman's office isn't always known.

"That's the challenge in this kind of work," said Civikly-Powell. "We can't prove the negative."

But they still try. At North Carolina State, Baroff uses a voluntary survey to try to determine his office's impact. It asks what visitors would have done if they hadn't come to see the ombudsman and what action they took after their visit. The survey's results, although not comprehensive, are encouraging.

"I know there are people who were thinking about leaving the university who decided to stay," said Baroff, whose office saw a little more than 200 faculty and staff cases last year. "Someone who was thinking about getting a lawyer decided not to."

And that in itself can be a victory.

"If you can avoid one lawsuit," said Kosakowski, "that justifies the office."

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